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ABSTRACT

Proponents of the cognitive approach to language teaching list linguistic competence as the primary instructional objective and attribute considerable importance to listening comprehension. For the student, linguistic competence would be knowledge of grammatical components of the language and its vocabulary. Understanding oral messages is an essential prerequisite for effective communication, the goal of foreign language teaching today. Training in aural comprehension is therefore crucial. The listener interprets speech in three interrelated stages: (1) the speech perception stage, (2) the speech comprehension stage, and (3) the memory storage stage. The listener employs these strategies in communication situations in the native language. Instruction in their use can facilitate the student's acquisition of the listening skill in the foreign language. The following approaches are suggested: presentation of taped listening materials which include normal speech patterns, instruction in general phonological patterns, training in parsing a sentence into constituents and recognition of content words, systematic vocabulary building, development of syntactic strategies, and judicious use of translation. If listening comprehension is a major goal, it should occupy a major part of the testing program. If the teacher devotes more time to the systematic analysis, practice and testing of listening comprehension, the student should acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. (AMH)

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Listening Comprehension: A Cognitive Prerequisite for Communication

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Foreign language methodologists have always included listening as one of the basic skills that a student is expected to acquire, yet many classroom teachers still overlook its importance and frequently slight training in aural comprehension on a day to day basis. Many teachers consider listening to be a simple decoding process, a skill that is easy to learn and that can be quickly passed over in order to concentrate on the more difficult task of speaking. Some may even feel that speaking somehow subsumes listening and, consequently, assume that if a student can produce oral sentences, he must automatically be able to understand them. However, as Belasco (1970) has convincingly demonstrated, the ability to vocalize has little correlation with the ability to comprehend. Speaking and listening are independent skills and require separate practice. Unfortunately, many classrooms now bear witness to an imbalance between the two. Despite the protests of methodologists, drills and exercises in speaking continue to predominate to the detriment of practice in listening.[1] Yet there are compelling reasons to believe that a more equitable balance should be struck.

The cognitive approach to language teaching attributes considerable theoretical importance to listening comprehension. Cognitive proponents such as Chastain (1976) and Rivers (1975) list the acquisition of linguistic competence

as the primary instructional objective. In its strictest sense, linguistic competence is the knowledge that a speaker-hearer must have of his language in order for him to speak and understand it. For the foreign language student, we may think of linguistic competence in terms of knowledge of the various grammatical components of the language and its vocabulary. The receptive skills of listening and reading play a key role in the student's acquisition of competence. The auditory and visual modes of perception are the means by which the language learner takes in linguistic data in order to develop competence. Since in the normal classroom situation the auditory mode is the most readily accessible and easily utilized channel of input, it follows that increased practice in listening comprehension should result in a higher degree of linguistic competence.[2] Because of its vital function in language learning, the cognitive method sets up the comprehension of oral language as one of the first performance goals in the classroom.

Today's student is told that the goal of foreign language education is communication, which involves both the sending and receiving of oral messages. The listener must be able to understand what the speaker is trying to convey in order to participate in the act of communication. Understanding oral messages is, then, an essential prerequisite for effective communication. As such, training in aural

comprehension is a crucial first step toward the goal of communicative competence.

If the end product of the foreign language classroom is to be a person who possesses the linguistic knowledge and the practical basis necessary for effective communication, then the initial stages, at least, of language learning should focus attention on the development of the listening skill. Such an approach should include the systematic analysis, practice, and testing of comprehending oral messages.

Many teachers have traditionally considered listening to be a relatively simple and passive decoding skill. Attainment of proficiency in the skill seemed to depend on two major variables, knowledge of the language and the student's attention span. Once the student had learned the rules and vocabulary of the language, he had merely to be receptive to the linguistic signal in order to understand its content. However, psycholinguistic investigations into speech perception and comprehension have revealed listening to be a much more complex process consisting of active procedures and strategies that enable the listener to understand. The listener's basic task is to construct the meaning of a sentence from a speaker's words and involves three closely interrelated stages: speech perception, speech comprehension, and storage of meaning in memory. Let us examine first the general psycholinguistic model in some detail and then its

implications for teaching listening comprehension.

In the speech perception stage, the listener takes in raw speech, which consists of a constantly varying, continuous flow of sound, and identifies the various phonetic segments. The listener uses the external acoustic cues contained in the speech stream and his internal knowledge of the language's structure to divide the flow of sound into identifiable phonetic segments. The segmentation-identification process does not require perfectly articulated speech to function smoothly. In fact, the acoustic properties of phonetic segments are frequently obscured and even entire phonetic segments can be deleted without interfering with perception. Since the speech stream may contain unreliable acoustic data, the listener has to rely heavily on his knowledge of the language to perceive segments correctly. He uses, in effect, his knowledge of the vocabulary of the language and its phonological structure to anticipate and fill in the missing acoustic cues.

The listener places the output of this phonological analysis in short-term or working memory, which marks the beginning of the comprehension stage. The listener's principal activity in this stage consists of parsing the phonological representation of a sentence into constituents, which will serve as the basic units in the sentence's analysis. The procedures he uses to accomplish this task can be

divided into two major sets, semantic and syntactic. In general, the listener seems to employ an initial semantic approach to construct a tentative interpretation of the sentence which he subsequently confirms by a syntactic analysis. Clark and Clark (1977) and Bever (1970) among others have suggested that within the semantic approach the listener follows a principle which we term linguistic realism. The listener makes the basic assumption that a speaker's words refer to real world objects and actions and uses his knowledge of what is possible in the real world as a guide in interpreting the sentence. Clark and Clark propose that the listener may employ a specific strategy whereby he uses content words alone to parse a sentence into constituents that make sense according to the principle of linguistic realism. For example, having heard "stumbled," "log," and "Fred," experience dictates that the listener would interpret the words such that "Fred stumbled over the log" and not "The log stumbled over Fred." More precisely, Bever has advanced the notion that the listener organizes constituents according to their logical internal relationships. He claims, in particular, that the listener tends to interpret a sentence in the order, actor-action-object, unless it is otherwise marked. Because of the fundamental importance of a sentence's structural framework, the listener comes to anticipate constituents that meet the semantic and syntactic

requirements of its surrounding structure. Thus, if the listener heard "Harry tried to open . . . ," he would expect the speaker to name next something that could be opened such as a "box" or a "door." After having analyzed a sentence for its meaning on the basis of its constituent structure, the listener relates it to the ongoing discourse. It is as though the listener builds up an internal model of the situation being described and interprets the current sentence such that it adds the next logical piece of information. The presence of a context and prior awareness of it have a significant impact on comprehension. Bransford and McCarrell (1974) have reported that the addition of a preestablished context in a sentence recall test increased subjects' scores by one hundred per cent.

The various grammatical and morphological markers found in the surface structure of a sentence have the ancillary function of confirming the preliminary semantically induced parsing of the sentence. Syntactic function words like determiners and prepositions and morphological markers such as nominal and verbal affixes mark constituent boundaries and enable the listener to identify the constituents as noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and verb phrases. In a sentence like "The man down the street is washing his car," detection of the various audible cues in its surface structure provide concrete guidelines that can assist in the parsing

process. The determiners "the" in "the man" and "his" in "his car" signal the beginning of the noun phrases that function as the actor and object, respectively. The auxiliary "is" marks the beginning of the verb phrase, and the affix -ing draws attention to the primary content word "wash" and classifies it as a verb. The preposition "down" serves to indicate the more precise structural relationship of the constituent "down the street" as referring to the location of the person washing the car. In most cases the listener has a plethora of such surface cues that can help him confirm his semantic analysis of the sentence.

Neither the semantic approach nor the syntactic approach is by itself sufficient to explain comprehension. In simple cases the listener may be able to circumvent the syntactic procedures entirely, but in more complex cases where a semantic analysis may not yield enough information, detection of grammatical markers is invaluable to the correct parsing of a sentence. Furthermore, it is not at all clear whether the two approaches apply sequentially or simultaneously in the analysis of a sentence. All that can be stated with certainty is that the two are closely interrelated and that the listener has strategies and procedures at his disposal from both approaches to aid him in understanding oral communications.

After the listener has parsed a sentence into

constituents in short-term or working memory, he recodes it for storage in long-term memory. The recoding process transforms the sentence, stored in verbatim form up to this point, into a much more abstract representation and at the same time precipitates the loss of syntactic and lexical details. Therefore, the listener retains only a skeletal semantic representation of the sentence. In grosso modo, he remembers the gist of what was said, not the form in which it was said. The listener organizes the semantic content of sentences in integrative clusters in which the idea of a sentence and its obvious implications are stored together with other related ideas. In ongoing discourse the listener follows this clustering principle such that as he takes in each new sentence, he builds up a general, global representation of the whole situation. The global representation will ultimately consist of the principal ideas and major transistions in the passage. As in the recoding of individual sentences, the listener retains only essential facts and discards irrelevant or insignificant details.

In summary, the listener interprets speech in three interrelated stages. First, in the speech perception stage he divides the speech stream into segments and identifies their phonetic content. Second, in the speech comprehension stage he uses various semantic and syntactic strategies to parse the sentence into constituents and identify the meaning and

function of each. Third, in the memory storage stage he recodes the verbatim content of the constituents in an abstract semantic form and places it in long-term memory clusters. The listening comprehension model that we have just outlined has several implications for the presentation of listening materials and suggests specific instructional techniques. During normal communication situations in his native language, the listener employs the strategies and procedures in each of the three stages without conscious attention. The general goal for the foreign language student is to use these strategies and procedures to comprehend the target language with comparable ease.

Adherence to several general principles implicit in the model we have presented and instruction in the use of certain key strategies can significantly facilitate the student's acquisition and refinement of the listening skill. In the speech perception stage the perceptual dichotomy of external sound and internal knowledge suggests that the presentation of listening materials should follow a progression from externally dependent comprehension to internally dependent comprehension. In the beginning stages of language instruction most teachers exercise great care in the slow and deliberate articulation of phonetic segments, which seems an appropriate introduction to the sounds of the language. Such precise articulation enables the student to focus on the

acoustic properties of the phonetic segments and promptly identify them without having to refer to the language's structure of which he has little or no knowledge. However, many teachers maintain this artificially slow speech tempo longer than necessary or even desirable. As the listener in his native language, the foreign language student should arrive at a point at which he identifies segments not only from their acoustic cues but also from his knowledge of the language. The presentation of listening materials should progress from carefully articulated speech to more natural conversational speech replete with hesitations, interruptions, and background noise. This purposeful contamination of the speech stream forces the student to activate his knowledge of the language in order to understand, since he can no longer depend simply on the detection of acoustic cues. He has to use his linguistic knowledge to formulate plausible hypotheses about the probable string of phonetic segments the speech stream might contain.

Awareness of the phonological structure and processes of the language has an obvious role in the identification of phonetic segments. Although most teachers expend a considerable effort in teaching precise phonetic details, instruction in general phonological patterns would be more helpful for the purpose of listening comprehension. In French, for example, the student should be familiar with liaison, which

determines the retention or deletion of word final consonants as in sans amis [sɑ̃zami] 'without friends' and sans moi [sɑ̃mwa] 'without me.' Exercises on liaison help make the student sensitive to phonetic variants like [sɑ̃z] and [sɑ̃] while recognizing that either sequence of sounds still represents the word sans 'without.' Liaison phenomena are widespread in French, and awareness of them can be crucial to understanding in cases such as ils ont [i(l)zɔ̃] 'they have' and ils sont [i(l)sɔ̃] 'they are' and nous avons [nuzavɔ̃] 'we have' and nous savons [nusavɔ̃] 'we know.' Knowledge of morphophonemic processes is particularly important, since while the phonetic variants still refer to the same basic morpheme, they also represent supplemental information.[3] Thus, in French nasalization in bon camarade [bɔ̃kamarad] 'good (male) friend' versus bonne camarade [bɔnkamarad] 'good (female) friend' adds to the basic meaning of bon 'good' the fact whether it is a good male or female friend. Knowledge of such phonological and morphophonemic processes enables the student to anticipate likely combinations of sounds and to identify more readily the words contained within the speech stream. In cases where a word is poorly articulated or obscured by background noise, he can make an intelligent guess about the probable sequence of phonetic segments which is consistent with the phonological rules.

It is recalled from the earlier discussion of speech perception that the acoustic properties of raw speech are not constant. They vary from speaker to speaker and even within the same speaker at different points in time. Yet the native listener is still able to identify the phonetic segments in such a fluctuating medium with a high degree of accuracy. The listener's perceptual system is context sensitive and can quickly adjust to the acoustic range of a specific speaker. For the student to develop such context sensitive perception, he has to be exposed to a variety of speakers of both sexes. If the teacher is the only speaker that the student hears, he will focus on the acoustic properties particular to the teacher's voice and not those of the phonetic system of the language. Almost all commercially available textbooks have accompanying tapes which include a variety of speakers. Liberal use of these tapes in the classroom is an efficient means of diversifying the phonetic input in listening comprehension practice.

In the second stage of the listening process the listener parses a sentence into constituents by the use of several semantic and syntactic strategies. Mueller (1974) and Rivers (1975) have recommended inserting pauses between constituents to aid the student in parsing a sentence.[4] They remark that these pauses also give the student additional time to interpret the words contained within each of the

constituents. Pausing has some benefit for the new student who is totally unfamiliar with the language. But perhaps more important than marking constituent boundaries is identifying key content words in the constituents and their function within the sentence. Bever (1970) proposed that the listener relies heavily on content words and what can plausibly happen in the real world to parse a sentence into constituents that make sense. He observed, in addition, that the listener organizes constituents on the basis of their logical internal relationships of which the order actor-action-object is the most basic. Bever's proposals suggest that the student should analyze a sentence in terms of its most important content words and in the form of a schematic representation. The structural relations that hold among the content words form the framework of the schematic representation. For the beginning student the presentation of oral sentences should conform to the most easily perceived actor-action-object order, since it permits the immediate identification of the function of the content words. Furthermore, adherence to this order should facilitate the recognition of the content words in each constituent. The actor-action-object order constitutes a sequence of sentence slots that the student can come to anticipate. Expecting the first part of a sentence to contain the actor slot, he will scan the initial sequence of words and search for

someone or something that is capable of carrying out some action. After locating the word designating the actor, the student will then be prepared to search the next sequence of words for the content word expressing action, and so on. Practice in this sequential strategy will lead the student to pick out in a sentence like Nathalie doit préparer ses examens 'Natalie has to study for her tests' the three major words essential for comprehension, Nathalie, préparer 'study,' and examens 'tests.' Sentences that inordinately complicate or violate the above sequence are best avoided until the student has had thorough practice in understanding the basic pattern. Even after the student has progressed to more complex sentences, it is instructive to have him analyze a sentence in terms of the actor-action-object order for its underlying semantic content. Thus, after hearing Michèle a fait réparer la voiture par son frère 'Michèle had her brother fix the car,' literally 'Michèle caused to repair the car by her brother,' the student should be asked to recast the sentence in a more elemental form like Le frère de Michèle a réparé la voiture 'Michèle's brother fixed the car.'

The principle of sentence schematics underscores the importance of recognitional vocabulary and reaffirms the need for systematic vocabulary building. The student should have a relatively large passive vocabulary in order to

recognize and identify the meaning of content words in the sentence. Yet no matter how thorough the vocabulary study, the student will eventually encounter a key word that he does not know. In those cases he should attempt to guess its meaning from the context. To guess from context means to formulate a guess as to what a word is likely to refer to in the real world within the context of the situation being described and then to determine whether that guess fits the semantic and syntactic requirements of the sentence. For example, if the student hears a sentence like Marc va se présenter au concours la semaine prochaine 'Mark is going to take the entrance exam next week' and does not recognize the meaning of se présenter 'to take (a test),' literally 'to present oneself (for examination),' he should formulate a hypothesis about its probable meaning within the sentence. The student may already know one meaning of se présenter 'to introduce oneself,' but he should immediately question this interpretation in the context of an academic examination. The teacher should guide him to reject completely this interpretation by pointing out that se présenter 'to introduce oneself' requires an animate complement and does not fit in the syntactic frame [_____ au concours], '[_____ (to) the entrance exam].' Further, realizing that the student recognizes that 'Mark' does something with or to an 'entrance exam' 'next week,' the teacher could

instruct the student to consider other plausible possibilities like 'pass,' 'fail,' or 'take.' Recalling the constituent 'next week' should lead the student to discard 'pass' and 'fail,' since without knowing a great deal more about Mark and the difficulty of the exam, it is not possible to predict his success or failure. Thus, the most appropriate choice for se présenter seems to be 'to take,' which is correct. If the teacher were to give this kind of guidance in helping the student to understand important content words, he would be training the student in the explicit use of the same comprehension strategies that he unconsciously uses in his native language.

Although syntactic and morphological markers appear to play a secondary role in the comprehension stage, they should not be altogether forgotten, since they represent a set of audible cues that can assist the listener in identifying constituent structure. The presence of a determiner signals the beginning of a noun phrase which may function as an actor or object in the sentence. In overtly inflected languages determiners often reveal information about the internal structure of the noun phrase, for example, whether the noun is singular or plural or masculine or feminine. Syntactic markers like the auxiliaries "have" and "be" and morphological affixes like -ed and -ing serve to demarcate the verbal segment. Auxiliaries indicate the tense and

aspect of the verb, but adverbial expressions like "yesterday" or "in a few days" redundantly specify aspect in most cases. On the other hand, since verbal affixes are adjoined directly to the verb, they represent immediate cues to its detection in the sentence and, therefore, carry a heavier perceptual load. For example, the past participle affix -é points out in effect the location of the verb terminer 'to finish' in the sentence Philippe a terminé ses études l'année dernière 'Philippe finished school last year.' Prepositions are perhaps the most crucial function words for comprehension. They specify the more precise internal relations among constituents. Failure to apprehend them or confusion as to whether one hears par 'by' or pour 'for' leads inevitably to miscomprehension. The various grammatical and morphological markers, except for prepositions, may well be unnecessary in situations in which semantic strategies are sufficient for comprehension. However, when the normal semantic strategies fail to yield adequate information for understanding, the student will find these syntactic strategies particularly useful as a secondary set of procedures.

The presence of a specific and concrete context dramatically increases the degree of comprehension by giving the listener a perspective in which to interpret a sentence. The importance of context dictates, then, that listening comprehension materials should always be presented as

ongoing discourse, not as a series of isolated or unrelated sentences. Furthermore, it is helpful to tell the student beforehand what is going to be described in a listening passage. Prior awareness of the topic of the passage enables the student to activate his knowledge of the topic and thereby eliminate from consideration those things he is likely not to hear and anticipate those that he might. Quinn and Wheeler (1975) go so far as to suggest that the beginning student be given the written text of the passage before he hears it. Pre-aural presentation of a written text is pedagogically sound, since the processes involved in reading appear to be similar to those involved in listening with the notable difference that the time constraints of the spoken medium are absent in the written one. The written form allows the student additional time to parse sentences into identifiable constituents. In preparation for a listening comprehension activity, the teacher should slowly read the written passage aloud and ask the student to identify the key content words by some marking device. During this time the teacher can direct the student's attention to difficult areas in vocabulary and sentence structure and guide the student to analyze the sentence by the use of the aforementioned strategies. After this preparatory stage, the teacher should then present the passage orally and require the student to listen to it without referring to the written

text. As the student learns more of the language, the preparatory stage will require less time, and he will eventually arrive at a point where a brief explanatory preface will suffice to trigger expectations of what he is likely to hear.

The last stage of the listening process involves the recoding of sentences for storage in long-term memory. The semantic parsing strategies that have been proposed here produce schematic sentences that have essentially the form and content which the student should recode for storage in long-term memory. Mueller (1974) has proposed a recoding exercise in which the student is asked to recount a sentence in skeletal form, that is, the original sentence stripped of all modifiers and embeddings. A slight modification of Mueller's proposal is in order for the beginning language student. Instead of asking the student to recount the sentence in the foreign language, it is advisable to ask him to restate it in his native language. Recounting in the foreign language does not guarantee comprehension, since the student may simply repeat a sequence of words that are devoid of meaning for him. The meaning system for the beginning student is couched in his native language. Therefore, restating the sentence schematic in the native language more directly associates the meaning of the sentence with the student's own meaning system. As the student comes to know

more of the language, this recoding exercise can be shifted into the foreign language.

Recalling sentences in recoded form has a twofold benefit for the student. It not only provides training in recoding but also helps overcome a frequently encountered problem that can be termed the first half phenomenon. That is, the student has a tendency to concentrate so much on the first words that he hears that he cannot remember or perhaps even fails to listen to the remainder of the sentence. Recalling a sentence in schematic form combats this tendency by guiding the student to listen for the major elements in each constituent and then recall them in a more easily retrievable form. In addition, the recoding strategy with its accompanying loss of syntactic and lexical detail dictates that the teacher cannot expect recall of every single item in a sentence. To do so amounts to making demands on the student's memory that exceed its normal capacity in his native language. Thus, questions that seek total recall elicit atypical language behavior and should be avoided.

In the last step of the recoding process the listener organizes the semantic representation of a sentence along with its implications and related ideas in integrative clusters. At the same time he constructs an ongoing global representation of the whole situation as the speaker describes it. The teacher can give the student practice in the use of

this global strategy in a way that parallels the reduction of sentences to schematic form. The teacher should ask the student to summarize a listening passage by listing its primary events and ideas. It is preferable for the beginning student to give the summary in his native language, and the more advanced student in the foreign language. After confirming that the student has correctly constructed the global representation of a passage, the teacher may then ask more precise questions about it. But, as he should not expect total recall in individual sentences, neither should he expect recall of unessential details from groups of sentences within the passage. Questions should refer to the main lines of the global representation, that is, the primary episodes necessary to its construction.

The following concrete example, taken from Valette and Valette (1976), will illustrate how the principles and procedures that have been proposed so far may be applied in the actual presentation of listening materials. In the classroom the teacher would preface the presentation of the dialog by a brief explanation to the effect that Philippe and Alain are discussing a date that Philippe has with Michèle. Philippe is running late and Alain volunteers to let Philippe use his car.

Philippe: Dis, Alain. Tu as l'heure?
(Hey, Alain. Do you have the time?)

Alain: Oui, il est deux heures dix.
(Yes, it's ten after two [two hours ten].)

Philippe: Deux heures dix? Déjà?
(Ten after two? Already?)

Alain: Oui, pourquoi?
(Yes, why?)

Philippe: J'ai rendez-vous avec Michèle à
(I have a date with Michèle at

deux heures et demie ... .
two-thirty [two hours and a half] . . . .)

Alain: Et alors?
(So?)

Philippe: Nous avons rendez-vous au
(We have [our] date in the

Quartier Latin! Impossible d'aller
Latin Quarter! [It's] impossible to go

là-bas en vingt minutes!
there in twenty minutes!)

Alain: Et si tu n'es pas à l'heure,
(And if you are not on time,

Michèle sera furieuse!
Michèle will be furious!)

Philippe: Exactement!
(Exactly!)

Alain: Ecoute, ma voiture est ici.
(Listen, my car is here.

Si tu veux ... .
If you want . . . .)

Philippe: Oh, merci, Alain. Tu es vraiment
(Oh, thanks, Alain. You are really

un chic type!
a nice guy!)

In the preparatory stage the teacher should read the dialog aloud while the student listens and reads it silently. Then, the teacher should reread each sentence and ask the student to underline and repeat the key content word in each constituent. Thus, in the first sentence, the student must underline virtually every word: Tu as l'heure?, whereas in the last sentence he has to mark fewer words: Tu es vraiment un chic type. In the rereading of individual sentences, the teacher can direct the student's attention to vocabulary items he does not know and urge him to guess their meaning from context. Let us suppose, for example, that the student does not know the word là-bas 'there' in the sentence Impossible d'aller là-bas en vingt minutes '(It's) impossible to go there in twenty minutes.' The teacher may prompt the student by mentioning the preceding sentence in which Philippe says that his date is in the Latin Quarter, which would suggest the possibility that the following sentence may contain an expression of location, perhaps 'there.' The teacher should then redirect the student's attention to the problem sentence in which he sees the verb aller 'to go,' a verb of movement. The adverbial expression of location 'there' fits the verb of movement, which confirms his original guess. The next step is to have the student listen to the dialog again without looking at the written text. The teacher should also instruct the

student to listen carefully for the words that he has underlined. This time the student listens to a professionally recorded version of the dialog, which exposes him to a different range of speech patterns. At the conclusion of the tape, the teacher should ask the student to summarize briefly what he has heard. After having verified that the student has constructed an accurate global representation of the dialog, the teacher may then ask questions about the major episodes in it. Some appropriate questions might be: "What time is it?" "Why is the exact time important?" "Does Michèle seem like a patient person?" "How does Alain help Philippe with his problem?" This method of presentation of listening materials does not require a great deal of class time, yet it gives the student thorough practice in using essential comprehension strategies.

A convenient source of listening materials suitable for presentation in the classroom can be found in language textbooks. Most lessons begin by a dialog or short narrative passage which can be used to this end. Instead of drilling this preliminary material to develop proficiency in pronunciation, the teacher could more profitably use it to develop the perceptual and analytic strategies necessary for comprehension. As the student gains more experience in the language, he should be exposed to unedited samples of real language such as those found in series like Paris

Nouvelles.[5] As the student achieves greater proficiency in applying these strategies, explicit analysis of sentences becomes progressively less important. What is important is that the student be given frequent opportunities to practice and hone the listening skills throughout the instructional process.

Testing plays an integral role in the development of listening comprehension. As Chastain (1976), Valette (1977), and experienced teachers all attest, a student quickly notices the kind of tests administered in the classroom and studies accordingly. If the testing program does not reflect the established classroom goals, the student will not reach those goals. Therefore, if listening comprehension is a major goal, it should occupy a major part in the testing program. Many teachers have traditionally devoted a great deal of time to testing recognition of grammatical and morphological markers such as whether a noun is singular or plural or whether a verb is in the present or future tense. This form of testing is by and large misdirected, since it tests recognition and not understanding, whereas the goal of listening comprehension is understanding the semantic content of an oral message. There is no apparent need to test recognition of syntactic and morphological markers apart from semantic processing. For this reason, tests of listening comprehension from the earliest phases of

the program onward should measure the student's ability to comprehend the semantic content of oral language. Translation is an effective device in this regard, since it provides a direct means of verifying comprehension. The term translation is not taken here to mean polished or skillful translation or that there is a unique native language equivalent for any given sentence in the foreign language. Rather, when using translation as a testing device, the examiner should seek only concrete evidence that the student has understood the major elements of the sentence, not whether he can remember to write down all the lexical and syntactic details. This requires that the teacher accept a wide latitude of responses, ranging from literal translations to much more indirect equivalent expressions. Also, listening comprehension tests should adhere to the same format as the presentation of listening materials in class. Specific translation tasks should be given in a realistic context which is prefaced by a brief explanation of the topic, as, for example, in the following sample test. Several potentially acceptable translations are given in parentheses.

> In the passage below you will hear Henri, a student who lives in Paris, describe university life in France. Listen carefully and translate the expressions that have been left out of the passage.
>
> Après que j'ai passé le bac, j'ai commencé mes études universitaires à Nanterre.

Je prépare en ce moment ma licence.
(I [am] prepar[ing] [right] now [my] licence.)
[am] work[ing] on at this time [my] masters.

Je n'aime pas le système d'enseignement à l'université. Le contact avec les profs est parfois
(Contact with the professors is sometimes
teachers

très difficile. Par exemple, dans les cours
very difficult.)
hard

d'amphithéâtre, on écoute les professeurs, mais

il est impossible de leur poser des questions.
(it is impossible to ask [them] [any] questions.)

Il y a aussi les examens. En juin, si on rate
(if one fails
you flunk

les examens de fin d'année, on recommence en sep-
[the] exams)
tests

tembre ou on perd courage et on abandonne.
(one loses courage and [one] gives up.)
you [you]

The underlined sentences are deleted from the student's copy of the test. When the test is administered in class, the examiner reads the passage only once, pausing after the sentences that the student is to translate. This kind of contextualized testing has shown promising results in first-year university-level classes. Informal evaluation indicates that this form of testing possesses a high degree of discriminative power. Statistical data to determine the validity and reliability of this testing device has been

collected and is currently being assembled. In addition, student opinions reveal a marked preference for this form of translation testing over the more traditional types. They find that the presence of a context enables them to more easily comprehend the sentences that they have to translate.

The principles and procedures that have been proposed here are intended to serve only as general guidelines not as rigid or failsafe instructions for success in teaching listening comprehension. The precise form that the specific teaching techniques will take depends ultimately on the ingenuity of the classroom teacher. In general, if the teacher devotes more time to the systematic analysis, practice, and testing of listening comprehension, the student should acquire both the skills necessary to understand oral messages in the foreign language and a greater familiarity with its linguistic structure. More thorough understanding will allow the student to enter into the act of communication, while increased linguistic competence will enable him to develop more efficiently the productive skill of speaking. Perhaps, then, he will be able to effectively engage in true communication.

NOTES

1

Numerous methodologists have protested the neglect of the listening skill. Angelis (1973), Belasco (1967, 1969, 1970), Chastain (1976), Mueller (1974), Postovsky (1974), Quinn and Wheeler (1975), and Rivers (1971, 1975) have all reaffirmed the importance of listening comprehension. Even as early as 1967, Belasco (p. 86) went so far to say that "Any practice in speaking in the initial stages of language learning should be performed in the interest of reinforcing listening comprehension rather than developing proficiency in the speaking skill."

2

Although not totally conclusive, Postovsky's (1974) language learning experiment in Russian corroborates in part this claim. Postovsky found that a four week delay in oral practice with a concomitant increase in practice in listening comprehension and written expression from oral input led to greater overall language proficiency. Postovsky's findings are very promising and suggest further research into the single affect of increased practice in listening comprehension alone on language proficiency.

3

Hammerly (1973) has questioned the utility of generative phonology for teaching pronunciation and argued against its use in the classroom. Although his arguments are well founded in terms of teaching pronunciation, generative phonology has direct applications in teaching listening comprehension. Generative analyses can reveal many of the phonological processes at work in the language, which can increase the student's knowledge of the language and enable him to anticipate more precisely what he is likely to hear.

4

Angelis (1973) has also proposed that questions on the familiar theme of who-did-what-to-whom can draw the student's attention to constituent structure, which, it might be added, also serve to indicate the function of the constituents. For example, after the presentation of the sentence Jean-Pierre écoute des disques 'Jean-Pierre is listening to records,' the student might be quizzed Qui écoute des disques? 'Who is listening to records?' to focus on the subject noun phrase. The student is required to identify the subject noun phrase by responding, Jean-Pierre. A second question should follow Qu'est-ce que Jean-Pierre écoute? 'What is Jean-Pierre listening to?' to focus on the object

noun phrase, which elicits the identification of the object noun phrase des disques 'records.'

5 There are several inexpensive series available which present samples of recorded live language. Paris Nouvelles offers approximately ten minute long passages of general interest with an accompanying written text. Paroles de France consists of shorter culturally oriented passages but has no written text. Other more specific series include Paris Arts et Lettres and Science Technique Industrie. For more information the interested reader may write to French Cultural Services, Radio-TV Department, 972 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10021.

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